

The Development of Socialism in the Past 100 Years: Dialectical Thinking of the French Revolution and the Chinese Revolution from the Perspective of Socialism

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Abstract. This essay examines the development of socialism over the century between the 1848 French Revolution and the Chinese Revolution. Although socialism did not emerge late in history, its most rapid development occurred over the hundred years following 1848. During this period, socialism underwent theoretical refinement under Marxism, witnessed the founding of the first socialist state, and participated in the people's first experience of governance — developments that have exerted profound influence on the present and on probable future trajectories. During the 1848 French Revolution, socialism was not systematic, and socialism was not in the mainstream. There had not yet been any previous successful socialist reforms and revolutions. In China, on the other hand, Mao Zedong and other socialist leaders implemented changes in socialism, which contributed to the victory of the Chinese Socialist Revolution. This paper aims to compare the two revolutions and identify the changes of socialism that could be deduced from these two revolutions.

Keywords: 1848, Blanc, Mao, Utopian Socialism, Marxism

1. Introduction

The historiography of the 1848 French Revolution is deeply intertwined with socialist thought: the events of 1848 mark the first sustained appearance of socialism as a self-conscious political ideology on the historical stage. Various workers' organizations and other political formations presented themselves as heirs to utopian socialism; it is precisely in this period that socialism began to shape historical processes in a decisive way. The outbreak of the June Days uprising in 1848, however, shattered many of these socialist hopes and precipitated the collapse of utopian socialism, prompting a decisive turn toward Marxist orientations. While Marxism represented a theoretical advance, its practical implementation required further human modification and adaptation. This essay discusses the pragmatic reforms to Marxism and socialism introduced by Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi and analyzes how these reforms were implemented in China. By comparing the commonalities and differences between the French and Chinese revolutions, the study seeks a dialectical assessment of this pivotal century in the history of socialism.

2. Socialism in the 1848 French Revolution

From a strictly political point of view, the revolutions of 1848 achieved limited immediate success, but the ideologies they produced had lasting influence across Europe. The clash of liberals, democrats, and socialists had not been seen any time before in European history, and the 1848 revolutions served as a “chamber” in which thoughts collided with each other. One of them, and arguably the most debated, is socialism. As Engels claimed, “The revolution of 1848 was not a local German affair; it was one phase of a great European movement. The moving forces were, to a greater or lesser extent, unconscious raw materials without a will of their own. They were molded in the course of a movement ... which under existing social conditions... is nothing but our own” [1].

The socialist appeal was evident throughout the 1848 Revolutions, and practices such as organized labor emerged during this period. A notable example was the creation of the National Workshops (Ateliers Nationaux) and the Luxembourg Commission by the Provisional Government after February 1848; Louis Blanc’s proposals had a strong influence on these initiatives [2]. The state offered jobs and funding for workers just as Blanc required, but the eventual outcome was the outbreak of revolutions in June 1848. The reasons for the failure of socialism in the 1848 French Revolution were not entirely political, and flaws in Blanc’s ideology likely contributed to the outcome. This part aims to identify the drawbacks in Blanc’s ideology and point out how these mistakes contributed to the failure of the 1848 French Revolution.

The socialist ideas led to the foundation of certain organisations during the 1848 French Revolution. However, before introducing the socialist ideologies that led the 1848 French Revolution, it is essential to examine the social and political context in which the revolution took place, so that it is easier to understand why people in France adopted the claims of Louis Blanc.

In the decades preceding the 1848 Revolution, France experienced rapid demographic growth and the uneven onset of industrialization. Weavers and factory workers experienced vast unemployment, and their living standards were pitiful. For weavers, especially silk weavers, wage cuts of up to 20-30% forced them to earn a salary of 1.5–2 francs per day, which was significantly below the subsistence level [3]. Factory workers, too, experienced a dramatic drop in employment rates, and unemployment surged to over 100,000 in Paris by early 1848 [4]. Women and children were forced to work for more than 14 hours, and industrial recessions in 1846-1847 led to mass layoffs [5]. By the late 1840s, unemployment and underemployment, rising food prices, stagnant wages, and deteriorating work conditions were prevalent in France. Unemployment and people’s struggles for survival caused public discontent and incited their hatred towards the factory owners, machines, and the government, who they thought took their jobs away.

Louis Blanc’s theory was thus extremely appealing to these people who were suffering from inhumane conditions. Blanc wrote famously in his “Organization of Work” that the state should provide “loans to create these workshops, which the workers themselves will manage,” and “all members of the association would receive equal wages” [2]. He condemned capitalism and competition for causing the people’s misery, a sentiment that resonated with the beliefs held by many working-class individuals. People began adopting his ideas, forming work associations among themselves, and some states even offered employment to unemployed individuals. Blanc’s ideas were rather appealing when employment itself was scarce, and this appeal lasted even into the 20th century, when some socialist countries, such as the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China [6].

However, it should be noted that Blanc is not a revolutionary, and in his mind, revolutions have done more harm than good to societies in general. Therefore, he relied more on the “intellectuals” to foster change in society, rather than relying on workers to revolt against the current system [7].

The enthusiasm for an organized work association led to the creation of National Workshops after the February Revolution in 1848. Still, it also sparked resentment among liberal politicians and the bourgeoisie, the former fearing the destruction of a free market, and the latter fearing the loss of their interests. This widespread fear among the leaders in the Provisional Government, which largely consisted of the bourgeoisie and liberal thinkers, led to the decision that they would not totally compromise with Blanc's ideals. The Provisional Government decreed the establishment of the National Workshops on 26 February 1848 [8]. They were intended as a partial fulfillment of the 'right to work' and reflected Blanc's socialist proposals. By June, nearly 117,000 workers had enrolled, many receiving only about 1.5–2 francs per day—wages widely criticized as insufficient [8]. The closure and restriction of the workshops helped precipitate the June Days uprising, in which at least 1,500 insurgents were killed and some 12,000 arrested [9]. In the end, Blanc's socialist practice was put into dust, and his ideology seemed to collapse.

During the "June Days", Blanc called on the workers to recognize that they were the victims of a "fatal misunderstanding", and he called for their disarmament. This was of no particular use, and the insurgents still went about rebelling [10]. Upon scrutinizing the entire process, the reason for Blanc's failure, which could also be seen as the workers' failure, was entirely political: the bourgeois government did not want a socialist organization to emerge, so it destroyed it. However, what was the fatal mistake that Blanc made in his ideology? Engels and Marx criticized that it was too utopian for a revolution, but this is akin to saying that people's mistakes were due to their own shortcomings. Observing Blanc's theory more closely, the "Achilles' Heel" of it was that it was overly reliant on the bourgeoisie, and it does not correctly identify the importance of the working people. He said that competition was ruining both the workers and the bourgeoisie, but when he called for an end to competition among workers, he also called for an end to the deterioration of the bourgeoisie. What's worse is that Blanc looked to the government, a conservative and capitalist government, to provide socialist help to workers, and instead of separating his Workshop from the government, he relied on the latter to offer opportunities to the former, and the profits made by the former were, in turn, given to the latter. This was no improvement over the capitalist economy, and he did not recognize, or refused to recognize, that factory owners did not want the workers to unite and create a group out of their collective ownership; the factory owners would work to an extent to destroy such organizations.

In addition, upon reflecting on the way Blanc's theory was implemented, it can be noted that the workers all worked for particular "superiors." The superiors, while assigning them work, also instigated competition among the workers, and in a sense, took away the fruits of their labor. The workers never worked for themselves, even in the National Workshop, and they were poorly paid so that they could not do anything other than work. It was the government that granted them the opportunity to labor in exchange for a decent living, and they worked for the government, the officials. The underlying implication of Blanc's theory was that workers and laborers are not forces that society relies on, but instead, tools that others could use and throw away easily. Therefore, they went around searching for jobs, and they were kicked around by the government, the factory owners, and the bourgeoisie, because the workers thought that they were reliant on these "superiors" for work. However, the workers are as important as these so-called authorities, and they both rely on each other. Imagine factories without workers, and the important role that workers play in society is evident. If Blanc truly recognized the significance of the workers and did not look down upon them, pitying them for being treated poorly by factory owners, and decided to maximize the needs and requests of the workers, they would have been better off. They coped with the scanty salaries because they thought that they were the ones who were employed, but the fact was, they also

employed the “employers”. Imagine that they were greedy enough to ask for high salaries, and were not lured by the 3 francs that the government paid, the government would surely pay higher, because it was in a condition as bad as the workers'. The same could be applied to the factory owners as well.

3. Socialism in the Chinese Socialist Revolution

The socialist thought manifested in the 1848 French Revolution represented an important moment when Marxism first stepped onto the historical stage in Europe. The theoretical core of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels lies in their belief that material conditions determine people's ideology. According to dialectics, Marx pointed out that the relations of production under capitalism would one day restrict the development of productive forces, thereby leading to the inevitable demise of capitalist relations of production [11]. He proposed: productive forces + relations of production = mode of production, and productive forces and relations of production are in opposition. Capitalism will inevitably give rise to monopoly and overproduction, while simultaneously intensifying class division, which in turn triggers the awakening of the proletariat's “universal class” consciousness, thereby sparking a communist revolution, establishing a proletarian government, and implementing socialism [12]. Therefore, Marx's revolutionary theory takes class analysis as its fundamental standpoint. In society, there exist the peasant class, the petty bourgeoisie of small workshops, the landlord class, the bourgeoisie, and many other strata, but due to the process of surplus value extraction, these strata will ultimately and inevitably converge into two opposing classes: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. As stated at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” [12] If a revolution cannot completely abolish classes, then the revolution is incomplete. On this, Marx and Engels described: it substituted one class for another, one form of oppression for another, one form of struggle for another.” [12] Looking back at the history of China's revolutions through the lens of class struggle, the logical thread becomes clearly visible.

However, how to implement Marx's emphasis on class struggle under specific national conditions remained a practical problem faced by communist parties in various countries. For this reason, Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi further localized and recreated Marxism within the Chinese Revolution. Mao Zedong was not content to passively wait for class contradictions to “naturally erupt” through historical development, but rather emphasized transforming the bourgeoisie through the proactive revolutionary practice of the proletarian ranks. He proposed theories such as encircling the cities from the countryside and the two-stage revolution, enabling Marxist revolutionary thought to truly serve Chinese society [13]. From the perspective of party members' cultivation, Liu Shaoqi stressed enriching and developing Marxism-Leninism by combining it with China's specific practices [14]. These theories and practices not only inherited Marx's core ideas of class struggle and historical determinism but also, through deep understanding and transformation of national conditions, advanced the Sinification of Marxism, ensuring the thoroughness of China's revolution at the class level and the consistency of its historical logic.

4. Primitive marxism thought

In original communism, there was little detailed guidance on how to carry out the proletarian revolution. On the contrary, based on Marx's dialectics, a conclusion was reached from the perspective of political economy that the proletarian revolution was bound to succeed. This led to major divergences among communist parties around the world on how to conduct proletarian revolution, how to put Marxist revolutionary theory into practice, and how to refine Marx's

revolutionary theory for use in their respective countries. Among these divergences, the most important and obvious point stemmed from Marx's view of historical development—namely, that history advances in a spiral and wave-like manner. This process cannot be artificially accelerated, nor can it be artificially slowed down; this is the core of historical determinism and historical materialism [11]. However, as the leader of a revolutionary party, Mao Zedong was unwilling to accept this ideological perspective. He hoped to transform the bourgeoisie through his own proletarian ranks and to refine Marxism to suit China, thereby winning the revolutionary war. In short, this is the contradiction between the original philosophical theory and the conflict between determinism and voluntarism once implemented in reality. It is highly worthwhile to study how thinkers refined Marxism in order to reconcile this contradiction.

Furthermore, Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi made tremendous contributions to the Sinification of Marxism. The proletarian revolutionary war led by Marxism-Leninism resolved all the crises that previous Chinese revolutions had encountered. These revolutions include the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's anti-Qing movement, the Xinhai Revolution, and Chiang Kai-shek's Northern Expedition. The crises faced by these revolutions shared a common feature: although China's revolutions had achieved success at the level of political ideas, the ideals of political revolution had not altered China's class structure [15]. After the 1911 Revolution, the nobles and court officials of the former dynasty transformed into capitalists and warlords. Although these warlords were nominally dispatched by the Republic of China after the Northern Expedition, they remained divided in reality. Neither social classes nor the economic system changed. This was because the revolutionary party had not carried out structural social reforms (such as attacking the landlord class's exploitation and redistributing land), but had merely conducted some political-ideological education within the party. For example, although the Kuomintang ended the warlord era after the Northern Expedition, class exploitation reappeared in a more advanced form: [15] exploitation of workers by urban factory capitalists, and exploitation of tenant farmers by landlords. Exploitation persisted, and the revolution was incomplete [15]. The thought of Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi effectively resolved this problem.

Mao Zedong acknowledged Marx's theory of historical determinism, but he also expended great effort to integrate Marxism with China's national conditions and culture. He refined the proletarian revolution into a methodology suited to China. He proposed concepts such as "On Practice," encircling the cities from the countryside, and the two-stage revolution, thereby guiding the Chinese people to embrace Marxism and putting the proletarian revolution into practice in China [16]. This shows that he still believed human consciousness could guide the proletarian revolution, rather than simply waiting for the development of history.

In 1927, Mao Zedong returned to his hometown in Hunan to conduct an investigation and wrote the Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan. I believe this report marked the beginning of Mao's refinement of Marxist thought to adapt to China's reality [17]. In the report, he pointed out that China's industrial strength was weak, that there were not many workers who could unite, and that they could not serve as the main force of revolution. At the same time, he observed that China's peasant class was vast in scale, had long been oppressed by landlords and bureaucrats, and possessed the potential to lead the revolution. He changed the Chinese Communist Party's previous prejudice against peasants' low cultural level and, for the first time, shifted the focus of revolution to the peasants [17]. In terms of specific measures for the proletarian revolution, Mao Zedong proposed the strategy of encircling the cities from the countryside [15]. Under the guidance of the Soviet-led Comintern, the Chinese Communist Party suffered heavy losses. The advisors sent by the Comintern did not consider the practice of Marxism from China's perspective; instead, they

chose to cooperate with the Chinese Kuomintang. As a result, Chiang Kai-shek launched a large-scale purge of the Party, plunging the CCP into danger. At this moment, Mao Zedong realized the urgent need to reinterpret Marxist revolutionary theory to meet China's needs. They first launched armed uprisings in various cities, such as the Nanchang Uprising and the Changsha Uprising, establishing the fact that the Chinese Communist Party was an armed political party. However, under the Kuomintang army's encirclement, cities fell one after another, and the Chinese Red Army was forced to develop bases in the countryside. Here, Mao discovered the new strategy of encircling the cities from the countryside: by carrying out localized land reforms and liberating serfs, they won mass support, established red bases of varying sizes across the country, and sought to spread communist culture nationwide. This method proved successful, as the Chinese Communist Party eventually gained a firm foothold in Yan'an [15].

Meanwhile, to clarify the leadership model of voluntarism, Mao Zedong put forward "On Practice." He wrote: "First, Marxism holds that man's social practice is the criterion of the truth of man's knowledge of the external world. Man's knowledge depends mainly on his activity in material production. In the process of production, man gradually comes to understand the phenomena, properties, and laws of nature, as well as the relations between man and nature; and, simultaneously, in the course of production, he gradually comes to understand certain relations that exist between man and man. Without practice, it is impossible to acquire knowledge." [16]. In this passage, he affirmed Marx's materialism—that matter determines consciousness. Human knowledge is derived from social practice and productive activity. In his *On Practice*, he held that knowledge arises from personal experience, followed by reflection leading to conclusions, then more experience, reflection, and conclusions. He illustrated this with the example of foreign delegations visiting Yan'an. The delegations first observed Yan'an's construction and local customs. They collected their experiences and drew the conclusion: "The Communist Party's policy of a united front against Japan is thorough, genuine, and sincere." Then they practiced and reflected again, concluding: "The united front against Japan can succeed." [16] Therefore, it can be seen that Mao believed the progress of thought could be cultivated through continuous practice, rather than simply waiting for sudden advances in thought, though contradictions remain in unity. Mao believed that his ideological leadership model was also driven by history.

One of the above viewpoints represents Mao's refinement of the revolutionary class in Marxism, dividing the working class into the proletariat and the peasantry, who together formed the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. Another represents the contradiction between Maoist voluntarism and Marxist historical determinism [18]. These belong to relatively detailed adjustments. As for adjustments at the overall level, Mao Zedong's "New Democracy Theory" must be mentioned. The main idea of his New Democracy was that China needed to carry out a democratic revolution before undertaking the proletarian revolution. He emphasized the need to unite all forces that could be united, including but not limited to the national bourgeoisie, the rich peasants, and the landlord class, to jointly resist external enemies (namely, feudal autocracy and the Japanese invasion). A coalition government composed of various classes would be established to create a new republic. On this basis, the proletarian revolution would then be carried out to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat [13]. This view contradicted Chiang Kai-shek's "internal pacification before external resistance" theory but won high praise among the people. This was because Mao Zedong, through rectification movements, made the Communist Party more united internally, and cadres went down to the grassroots to participate in production labor alongside the people. This greatly enhanced the CCP's reputation in China and allowed communism to spread more widely in the country [15].

The above are the three main aspects of Mao Zedong's refinement and Sinification of Marxist thought. As a revolutionary, he can be considered highly successful. His voluntarism and Marxist historical determinism were not in conflict but rather led people to firmly believe that his iron will was itself the mandate of history.

As Mao Zedong's revolutionary comrade, Liu Shaoqi published *On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members* when Mao opposed dogmatism. This represented another refinement of Marxist thought by the CCP. In this book, Liu Shaoqi put Marxist philosophy into practice. He wrote: "We must, on the basis of new experience, study which individual conclusions and which individual aspects of Marxism-Leninism need to be enriched, supplemented, and developed. In short, we must integrate the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of revolution." [14] Before this, he first affirmed the correctness of Marxism-Leninism, but here he also cautiously suggested that Marxism-Leninism needed to be improved and strengthened based on conclusions drawn from practice, in order to adapt to China's conditions. Although Liu Shaoqi later became Mao Zedong's political enemy, it is undeniable that he contributed to the Sinification of Marxism [19].

5. Analysis of the two revolutions

The above outlines the main origins and developments of the 1848 French socialist revolution and the Chinese socialist revolution. Before the analysis, we must first make clear that although both revolutions belong to socialist revolutions, they are essentially different. The 1848 French socialist revolution was a struggle by the proletariat against the distressing conditions of real life, whereas China's socialist revolution aimed to overthrow the entire bourgeois regime and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat (later renamed the people's democratic dictatorship) [20]. Compared with the French socialist revolution, China's socialist revolution had the guidance of Marxist thought; therefore, although the two revolutions were only a hundred years apart, they differed greatly. In order to view and compare these two socialist revolutions dialectically, this article will analyze their similarities and differences from the following angles: guiding ideology, revolutionary subject, and revolutionary outcome.

From the perspective of the revolutions' guiding ideology, the difference in guiding ideas led to different forms of legitimacy in the two revolutions. The guiding ideology of French socialism in 1848 was proposed by Louis Blanc. They established civil organizations, advocated socialism and humanistic ideas, and hoped that the government would strengthen the protection of citizens' employment opportunities and the rights of the elderly and the weak. This revolutionary guiding ideology aimed to resolve workers' unbearable living conditions and rescue vulnerable groups from peril. This thought was very attractive to vulnerable groups and the proletariat, but its shortcoming lay in Blanc's own negation of the legitimacy of revolution: he believed revolution was harmful to society and preferred that his ideas promote social reform [2]. This led to the bankruptcy of the June Uprising's legitimacy, because the revolutionary thinker himself did not support this revolution, and in the end, the socialist revolution evolved into a riot without leadership and without an inner core [10]. In contrast, the Chinese Communist Party's revolutionary guiding ideology was Marxist thought, and later Mao Zedong Thought was added as a supplement. Marxist thought holds that the bourgeois government is to be replaced by the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that the mode of revolution is natural evolution—when capitalism restricts the productive forces, revolution will naturally break out. Mao Zedong Thought holds that the revolutionary process can be altered by human will. Nevertheless, without exception, both Marx's thought and Mao Zedong Thought aimed to thoroughly destroy the capitalist regime rather than compromise with or revise the bourgeoisie.

This kind of thought at least gave the Chinese Communist Party's revolution legitimacy at the level of socialist theory [13]: the proletariat's struggle was not meaningless, and it also prevented the proletarian revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party from turning into a "riot" like the June Uprising of 1848. Marx foresaw natural capitalist implosion; Mao infused voluntarism—yet both targeted systemic destruction [11].

The revolutionary subjects of the two revolutions also exhibit a contradictory unity. Viewed macroscopically, the doctrine of both sides' revolutions is proletarian; both are socially disadvantaged groups. But once subdivided, one finds many differences between the groups participating in the French socialist revolution and those participating in the Chinese socialist revolution. First, thanks to the Industrial Revolution, the main body of the 1848 French Revolution was workers, whereas China's industry lagged behind, so the main body of the revolution was peasants [4]. Workers and peasants are essentially quite different: the working class had received relatively good education compared to the peasants (though the workers were not necessarily well-educated), which made it easier for them to understand the core ideas of revolution, while the peasantry had not received education, and their revolutionary motivation came only from insufficient means of subsistence; they had no demands for political goals such as democratization. Therefore, from the perspective of the revolutionary subject, it is very important to adapt theory to the revolutionary class. For example, to successfully lead a workers' revolution, one needs clear political goals supported by rigorous theory; only in this way can the working class's maximum revolutionary potential be brought into play. As for a peasant revolution, the revolutionary theory should be as simple as possible—for instance, Mao Zedong's slogan "strike the local tyrants and divide the land" [17]—so that the peasantry can easily grasp the goals of the revolution. At the same time, due to the lack of education among peasants, political work should also be placed in a primary position, explaining the aims of the revolution with simple and easy-to-understand political theory, to bring the peasantry's revolutionary potential into play [17]. Blanc's theory did not fully bring out the capacity of the working class, whereas Mao Zedong's theory successfully mobilized the peasantry [3].

It is quite evident that, in terms of revolutionary outcomes, the French socialist revolution failed, while the Chinese socialist revolution succeeded. The failure of the French socialist revolution can be attributed to the incompleteness of revolutionary thought, insufficient planning, and the wavering of the proletariat. But from another angle, both revolutions fulfilled their historical missions. Although the French Revolution ultimately resulted in the bourgeois government replacing the monarchy, the seedlings of socialism had already emerged [21]. For the vast proletariat, this was a new beginning. As Marx said, the progress of human society is not achieved at one stroke; when a relation of production limits humanity's productive forces, it will be eliminated. In France at that time, the bourgeois regime was most suitable for that historical period, so the fact that the proletariat did not seize power should not be overly blamed [21]. The Chinese socialist revolution, in every sense, was successful. Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi successfully Sinified Marxism and mobilized China's peasantry to carry out a successful socialist revolution. Many times, when workers are exploited and peasants are oppressed, those in power or thinkers, in order to maintain social stability, will divert contradictions outward, leading to the prevalence of populism. At that time, Mao Zedong's advanced ideas pulled a right-turning China back and established a proletarian regime.

6. Conclusion

Though the 1848 French Revolution and the Chinese Socialist Revolution differ in their backgrounds and ideologies, both represented significant developments in socialism, and they

demonstrated the evolution of socialism throughout the years. Socialism had been refined throughout the 100-year interval between the two revolutions, and it became more comprehensive and practicable. Socialism became more scientific and independent, and the proletariat started to become one of the driving forces in social reforms. Marxism did refine socialism and communism theoretically, but the eventual success of the Chinese Socialist Revolution relied on the adaptation that Mao and Liu made so that socialism became more accommodated to reality. The 1848 French Revolution lacked in both reality and ideology, but despite its unsuccessfulness, both it and the Chinese Socialist Revolution contributed to the development of socialism, and they could not be ignored or overlooked.

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